

5-1-1958

Soft Metal Man

Frank P. Donovan Jr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Donovan Jr, Frank P. "Soft Metal Man." *The Palimpsest* 39 (1958), 230-236.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol39/iss5/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Soft Metal Man

Early in 1942 Harry Bedwell was back on the railroad, one of the old Soft Metal Gang. These men, with "silver in their hair, gold in their teeth and lead in their pants," as he put it, came out of retirement. They gladly pitched in during the manpower shortage to keep the trains moving while the nation was at war.

Bedwell's first assignment was at Norwalk, near Los Angeles, on a branch line of the Southern Pacific. There was plenty of work to do but no train orders to copy. Next he went to Glamis, where he had issued his last train order thirty-five years before. He sat down at the same telegraph table and began "sending" over the Morse wire exactly where he had left off at age nineteen. You get a nostalgic picture of him as one of the old Soft Metal Gang in his novelette "Desert Job."

He afterward worked at numerous stations on the main line of the SP between Los Angeles and Yuma, also at Calexico. At the latter town, on the Mexican boundary line, he saw many "wetbacks" or "border jumpers," so vividly described in "Night of Plunder." When that two-part serial ran in the *Post* Bedwell commented, "It looked for

a time as if it were going to cause an international incident." The *Post* editors boiled down his eighty-page manuscript, taking out some of the "purple passages," which had tended to give the Mexican "wetbacks" better treatment. Bedwell related that he received threatening letters from Mexico and "one from a conspirator" who tried to ring him in on a revolution that was brewing down there at that time. "But I ducked out of that one," he reflected in a letter to the writer.

Later Bedwell saw duty on the SP's coast line between Los Angeles and San Francisco. While living in Ventura he was only a few feet from the blue Pacific. Here he loved to watch the red-and-yellow *Daylights* speed by, making the setting, at least for him, worthy of a Rembrandt. In "protecting" these assignments he and his wife generally lived in a trailer.

In 1952 he traded his rights on the Los Angeles Division for those of the Portland Division and worked on several freight-only lines in Oregon. His last post was at Seghers, an out-of-the-way lumber mill in the dense timber country between Portland and the Pacific Ocean. Bedwell retired from the Southern Pacific on April 29, 1955, after 32 years with that road or its allied Pacific Electric.

Shortly after he went back to railroading in 1942, he had his first and only book published. Titled *The Boomer*, the novel is actually seven

short stories rewritten and tied together to make one harmonious whole. It received most favorable reviews. The *New York Times* hailed the book's hero, Eddie Sand, as "an upstanding, lovable fellow, a legend among railroad men" and called the novel "A pleasant, readable story, dealing knowledgeably with a world one knows little about, and not without thrill and adventure." The *Herald Tribune* exuberantly proclaimed it "an exciting yarn in sinewy prose about brakemen and engineers and telegraphers. . . . Eddie Sand is a genuine and winning character. . . . It has almost everything except sound effects by Richard Gardiner."

The novel was reprinted (106,000 copies) in a pocket-sized overseas edition for the armed forces. Bedwell was proud of his Iowa background, and the volume has many flashbacks to his early years in Iowa and Missouri. Consider, for example:

Eddie had come out of the prairies, learned the trade "hamming" about a country station, and was being moved from station to station as relief man on the line along the Missouri River, a green boy of sixteen who had arbitrarily added two years to his age to get a job, a rebel kid who would fight for his rights with impatient, willful alacrity, wide-eyed at all the world; a good operator, lacking only seasoning, when they shoved him into the St. Joe yard office, a hot telegraph job. The pressure here was intense, you worked with the fastest in the craft, and a kid might have fallen down for lack of confidence.

That's Harry Bedwell mirrored in Eddie Sand.

Again, his homespun description of a caboose ride is tip-top Americana if not "Iowana."

The busy speed and the stubborn, muffled rumble of the moving train made you feel tucked-in. You felt at home in a caboose, the way you do in a farmhouse kitchen. The ghosts of a thousand sturdy meals, ingeniously cooked by trainmen on the small round top of the drum-bellied heating stove, were faintly there among the shadows. There were smells of a dozen brands of tobacco, some of them with a range of forty yards, but all mellowed by time and the milder mixtures of old leather upholstery and signal oil. It was a snug, tight feeling, with the wash of the rain at the little windows and the brisk rhythm of wheels clicking at the rail-joints. Dim lamps in brackets and lanterns, red and white, by the back door. Above, in the cupola, the faint outline of the rear brakeman, lounging there on lookout. The high wail of the engine's whistle trickled back, a thin challenge.

It is hard to liken Bedwell to other Hawkeye writers, simply because he wrote entirely on railroads. One can, however, point out certain regional characteristics common to Phil Stong's *Village Tale*. Stong's "Kaydee" moseying along the 166-mile Rock Island line between Keokuk and Des Moines has the local color of a Bedwell setting. Indeed, the "Six-Forty-Five" meant as much to the folks of "Brunswick" as the old depot and local trains did to Bedwell and other Keller-tonians at the beginning of the century. But the salty, carefree railroaders, craftsmen in their own right, bear a much stronger resemblance to the lusty railroad linemen in William Wister Haines's

Slim and *High Tension*. Des Moines-born Haines's pole-climbing individualists have the same clear ring as Eddie Sand, Hi Wheeler, Mel Hatch, Walley Sterling, to mention a few of the characters in Bedwell's yarns. This is not surprising, for both authors participated in the work they portray, and have the happy faculty of putting their experiences into story. Their expressions are pat, pertinent, and genuine. Their nomenclature is dictionary-clear to those in the industry and is part of the woof and weave of their calling.

Although Bedwell has some aspects of realism, he is primarily a romanticist. Railroading to him was not a job; it was an adventure. He, like the late Edward Hungerford, saw trains and all that goes with them in rosy-tinted perspective. More than anything else Bedwell lamented the passing of the boomers. "They were a restless breed," he soliloquizes in his writings, "and their lives were high adventure. They were the glory of railroading. They'd split their last dime with you, or bust your nose if they thought you needed it."

In one significant respect (and there were others) Bedwell was like Frank H. Spearman, dean of railroad fiction writers. He had the ability to listen. He seldom talked about himself, preferring to let others do the speaking. Apropos of this Charles Wallace comments:

There was something uncanny about the way he seemed

to attract the hard-of-hearing and the way he could talk to them. I never met so many hard-of-hearing people as when I was with Harry. Just one example. At a get-together of some Hollywood top talent Harry was seated almost instinctively next to Rupert Hughes and spent the evening relaying witticisms to him. Hughes is very hard-of-hearing.

Another characteristic was his modesty. He was ever willing to give other people credit. However well versed an operator may be, there are a lot of little things he cannot possibly know about the running of trains. For details in this phase of railroading Bedwell turned to his friend William F. Knapke, a former Southern Pacific conductor. Bill Knapke is a man of parts, a boomer with a service record from 32 railroads. He has twisted brake-wheels, pulled throttles, punched tickets, and flagged trains all over the nation and in Mexico, the Philippines, and Cuba. And he is a writer, too, having had almost as many true tales published as the number of "pikes" on which he rail-roaded.

Finally, Bedwell took untold pains to revise and rewrite his manuscripts. He would sometimes redo a paragraph a dozen times to bring out the proper meaning, color, or setting. Experience taught him, as it does all writers, that one cannot be too careful in checking for accuracy. Once he omitted a three-word phrase "through the siding" from a *Post* story, and he received over 70 letters of protest from readers.

Besides his long list of published works, Bedwell had one story issued as a radio broadcast. This was "Priority Special," which appeared on the air June 6, 1945. It described the careful movement of a hospital train on the Southern Pacific up and over the mountains into desert country with never a stop or jar. The selection, along with his "Smart Boomer," is reprinted in *Headlights and Markers, An Anthology of Railroad Stories*. That tale of mountain railroading, in the words of Robert Selph Henry, "depicts extraordinarily well the curious mixture of group loyalty and loyalty to the job which runs through the whole business of keeping the trains moving." It originally appeared in the *Post*.

When Harry Bedwell retired he and his wife bought a home in Nevada City, California. But the Great Dispatcher was soon to give the sixty-seven-year-old railroader his last orders. In working about his new home he slipped on a rock and was injured. Complications later developed, and he took a turn for the worse. While he was critically ill he confided to his loyal friend Wallace, "I wanted to have this place all fixed up so you could come up here and live and we could get busy on a novel."

That was as far as the joint-novel ever progressed. He died on October 4, 1955.

FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.